



## Iowa Journal of Literary Studies

---

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 4

---

1989

# Interview with Bill Devall

Amy Nerenhausen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijls>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nerenhausen, Amy. "Interview with Bill Devall." *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies* 10 (1989): 9-16.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0743-2747.1292>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iowa Journal of Literary Studies by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## INTERVIEW WITH BILL DEVALL

---

Amy Nerenhausen

BILL DEVALL IS well-known as both theorist and activist in the environmental movement. In his work he examines such subjects as the philosophical basis of ecology (ecosophy) and the problem of living an ecological life on a daily level. His books include *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, written with George Sessions, and his recent *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology*. He is currently teaching in the Department of Sociology at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California.

*In both Deep Ecology and Simple in Means, you make distinctions between deep ecology, reform environmentalism, the new age movement, and things like that. Could you give us an idea of what deep ecology is and in what respect it is fundamentally different than those other movements or philosophies?*

Yes, I'd say that deep ecology uses the norm of biocentrism or ecocentrism, not just the narrow interests of human beings that reform environmentalists have frequently been concerned with—the pollution and health effects of industrial societies on middle class and upper-middle class citizens of those societies—rather than with the fundamental causes, reasons for the environmental crisis; and without addressing the intrinsic worth or intrinsic value of their species.

*How do you see the deep ecology perspective being demonstrated in the world today?*

I see it demonstrated on the frontlines in standing in front of all those redwood trees. People who climb redwood trees in my own county, Humboldt County, and say, "I'm here because I'm defending these trees. I'm not defending them for their aesthetic value to humans, I'm here because I'm witnessing for them." And I see it in ecophilosophy

circles, the people working, articulating deep ecology positions. I see it—I hear it, the more I'm listening to people express themselves in "counsels of all beings" in reform, in the sense that I feel almost universally when I mention tropical rain forests and people say, "No, that's not right. Humans should not be, have no right to, chop down tropical rain forests. Just no. That's just not right, to chop down tropical rain forests." And they can't explain it, and I can't explain it, but they know it shouldn't be done.

*You frequently mention Gandhi and his philosophy and use of civil disobedience. What role might civil disobedience play in the life of a person practicing deep ecology?*

I think one act of civil disobedience is to refuse to go to shopping malls. In this society where it's almost imperative to "shop till you drop," if you refuse to go to a shopping mall, if there was mass refusal to enter a shopping mall, to sit in a parking lot and shop in the mall, that's about the greatest threat that you could think of. There are a lot of places for civil disobedience. Reclaiming a nuclear test site in Nevada is an example of that. Reclaim the desert for the bobcats and for the rabbits that live there. We don't need this—the Department of Defense doesn't need this nuclear testing. So we are reclaiming it for the residents of that site. Civil disobedience in front of a Forest Service Office as a protest of herbicide spraying—all kinds of situations where one could use civil disobedience as an expression of your resistance. It is putting your body where your mouth is, as it were. But, of course, disobedience here is within the context of a much larger movement. I mean, look at the people who resisted the Nazis by saving some of the homosexuals or Jews or gypsies by hiding them in their homes. They seem to come from a position of non-cooperation. I'm not going to cooperate, and I'm going to be devious, and I'm going to use a few of my friends whom I trust, and we are going to do what we can. We can't face up against their guns, but we can hide people and use very, very creative means to disrupt their system. And you can always use creative means to disrupt bureaucracies. So I see that as part of civil disobedience. Bureaucracies are very vulnerable, and sometimes they're vulnerable to a monkey wrench. Equipment is only as strong as its weakest link. This has been shown time and time again. Using a candle in a tunnel at a nuclear power plant called Brown's Ferry almost led to a meltdown. They had a blackout, the lights went out and someone lit a candle and took it in and almost burned the wiring. That was not an act of civil disobedience, it was inadvertent, but it shows the vulnerability of so many of these systems. Finding those

vulnerabilities is a creative task, if you want to bring in that.

*Barry Commoner, when he was here last time—and I've heard other ecologists saying the same thing—said that population isn't the problem or isn't necessarily even a problem. What is your view of that?*

There are more immediate problems that are leading to tropical deforestation, including the policies of the federal governments and members of the United Nations and the World Bank, but population is still a problem, world population and consumption of resources. And it's interrelated to all these other problems, but it's one that we have to address. Some of these leftists that say that population is not a problem take the same position that a lot of the rightists take, a lot of the capitalists take; and I find this probably shows the difference in paradigm between deep ecology's world view, and these more traditional Marxist paradigms which are so close to capitalist paradigms, so close to capitalist dogma, which really encourages more people, rather than talking about the impacts on the biosphere. Many of them, rightist and leftist, would not agree with the position that humans should not lead to the destruction of rain forests. The rain forests are there; if they can't be directly used by humans, then they should be used for economic development. Looking at the demographic transition, many "third world" countries are caught in what demographers call the second stage of demographic transition, of high birth rates and decreasing death rates. And with the rate of economic growth, even with massive infusions of capital (transfers of capital between Western nations) I cannot see how, in the next twenty years, before more destructions of ecosystems occur, that you could possibly increase the standard of living to a point where this famous demographic transition of Western Europe could occur. I don't see how you can take the demographic theories that occur in the United States and Western Europe and transfer them to the situation in "third world" countries at the present time. And socialist countries—and I don't know why American socialists don't look at this—the most important socialist country, China, has directly faced up to population, the problems of overpopulation; they have a national program to reduce the rate of population increase. Now why don't American socialists, American green socialists, look to the Chinese model? Do they reject China as a socialist state? I don't know. China has about one-fifth the total population of the world. I think we in the West should applaud and should support Chinese efforts to reduce their own birthrate. This is occurring within the context of their own culture. They've made the decision for strict control of population increase or they're

going to be swamped. They cannot keep up with the population increase of historic levels. Most of this is occurring in rural areas, not in urban areas, 80 percent of the population—I could go on and on. These socialists only have to read reports in the *New York Times* to find out what's happening in China. Or read journals from China.

*We in the West seem to be not very quick to applaud any of the positive things going on in the rest of the world, though.*

Well, that's a different question. What I'm applauding and I'm asking, is that Barry Commoner look to the Chinese, what the Chinese are doing. They said that they have a population problem and engaged in many programs to encourage people to reduce the number of births that they've had. And it seemed to have been successful in reducing the average births from about 6.5 per married woman to maybe three. Of course, what they wanted was one child per family. They've had a lot of difficulties enforcing that, or encouraging that.

*When I discuss deep ecology, I get, if not overtly, the sort of glances askance. How do you respond to people that label deep ecology as something that doesn't really have any substance to it, because it's not "science"?*

It's kind of a put-down. And those to me show ideological biases of contemporary science. I don't know if you subscribe to the *Ecologist* magazine—it's a British publication. The current issue is on deep ecology; and Robert Goldsmith, who is the editor of it, ends with what he calls an overriding arc of "what is ecology." And he specifically says that ecology is emotional and it probably will not be taught in academia. In fact, he almost says that one of the last places to teach ecology is in American academia, because American academia does not recognize the emotions, does not recognize the subversive nature of ecology, and tries to take ecology and pervert it into another reductionist science that just happens to be interested in relationships. And it's a very useful approach to take. That's the way I'd answer that. Deep ecology is grounded, but it's grounded in a different metaphysics than contemporary reductionist science. I would really refer you to that version of ecology. This is just one vision; it's his attempt to sit down and systematically outline it.

I might sit down sometime and outline it a little bit differently. I kind of take the position Paul Ehrlich takes in his book *The Machinery of Nature*, that we do need a kind of deep ecology change, but in the meantime the best way to get people to see a little bit differently is to teach them contemporary theories in ecology about relationships. So,

what he tries to do is to review the last twenty years of theory-making in ecology. And I always have my students in this deep ecology class read portions or all of Donald Worster's book called *Nature's Economy*, which is a history of ecology as a science to show the continuity of the themes in ecology as a subversive discipline, subversive to reductionism. But, I don't know, when people say, it's soft, that's where they're coming from.

*How is your course arranged? What's the general teaching methodology or the general set-up of the course that you teach?*

I teach several different courses. I teach a course called "Forest and Culture" where we look at different perspectives on nature. I teach a course on wilderness and civilization, an experiential course, on sort of the history of deep ecology ideas. Those are upper-division courses in this area. If I was living in the desert, I'd teach a course on desert ecology.

*Are they centered around readings and discussions?*

Yes, most of them, except for the experiential one, in which we go through a series of exercises, mostly to sensitize us on how you build a relationship with a place. We have a great deal of difficulty relating to other people, you know, touching and feeling and understanding their emotions, treating them as equals, all that stuff. So, being stripped from our places, how do you build a relationship with a place? How do you build identification with it so you understand its moods? One of the things we do is ask people to follow, over the course of the semester, six months, where the wildflowers bloom and record it in their journal. What were the birds that you saw, that came back with the seasons? Which way do the streams flow? What's the source of the streams? Things like that. Then in the seminar classes we also do a series of exercises, including asking students to examine their own childhood places, where they played, made treehouses, and what those places are like now. A lot of students in California find that the places they played in are made into shopping centers. Dana Lyons has a wonderful song on the defense of treehouses. He has eight-year-olds singing to defend their treehouses against the developers. I mean, treehouses are lost to the developers. I don't know if people even build treehouses anymore. He found eight-year-olds in the schools where he sings, who said, "You know, we should stop the bulldozers!"

*Don't take my treehouse! That's great!*

So we talk about childhoods. Then we have them write ecotopian visions. And we talk about animals and discuss other exercises like that. And we read a lot of poetry. We ask students to bring poems and use those as a springboard for discussion.

*Who besides Gary Snyder comes up a lot?*

Well, Antler is a friend of ours who lives in Milwaukee and writes about the midwestern bioregion. So, we try to find bioregional poets. Maybe we can find some here in Iowa.

*Schools seem to have taken an increasing responsibility for not only developing the educational, the knowledge base of kids, but also of developing their moral and philosophical bases. How do you see, or envision, the fostering of a deep ecology perspective in schools?*

That's a question we've considered quite a bit. I certainly don't have a program for it, but I guess I've been most influenced by some of the theorists in childhood psychology and some of the writing: Paul Shepard, a book called *Nature and Madness*, I cited in my book; Edith Cobb's *The Imagination of Childhood*; some of the work on the magical years in the first years of childhood. It was suggested there are certain phases in the life cycle where bonding occurs. You see this when infants are not bonded to their parents—to their own mother in particular—within the first few hours or days of birth, that they have difficulty bonding with people for the rest of their lives. The famous experiments with monkeys where the psychologists tortured those poor monkeys by separating the mother and child—they demonstrated the deprivation that this has. I think we see this (we don't have these kind of controlled experiments), we see it if children are deprived of a rich, natural environment. If this type of environment were easy [laughs]. . . . We end up finding it very difficult to bond with nature, to understand an affective relationship with a river or with a mountain range. Maybe there are some crucial years of eight years, or nine years, or ten years, where this bonding occurs. That kind of bonding of affection and love and broader identification is necessary before you can develop anything but a very artificial philosophy. You might talk intellectually about a philosophy, but you can't understand that philosophy without this affective relationship. Just like you can understand, perhaps, a philosophy that you should not beat your wife, but you don't feel it unless you have gone through

therapy, then, as adults. So I think that deep ecology has more addressed, again, these ontological questions rather than leaping to the ethical questions, teaching children values; it teaches children how to relate first, then talks about values.

*You contrast wisdom and knowledge. How are these different and where is there room for both of those in deep ecology?*

Well, there's room for knowledge. Knowledge, to me, comes from the paradigm that we put on the world. For example, we develop knowledge about ozone depletion. Partially, our facts are dependent upon the instruments that we use to measure ozone, and our theory of ozone, and the models that we develop (or the sciences develop) concerning ozone; and, in a limited sense, those are very useful to us, to have that kind of knowledge. But wisdom, or particularly, casuistry, is the deeper understanding. I guess the way understanding would be used in a Buddhist sense: how you cut through the illusions of the world to get to what is authentic, what is real. And so wisdom is understood rather than explained.

*You talk a lot about Buddhism and the different Eastern traditions. How would you compare or contrast those with the dominant religion in this country, the Judeo-Christian?*

I wouldn't attempt to compare them. I would say that there have been scholars and religious leaders who can see what deep ecology is about within a Buddhist tradition, it seems, more easily than many Christian religious leaders have been able to see what deep ecology is about. I'm thinking of people like Robert Aitken (Roshi), and Thich Nhat Hanh, and other contemporary Buddhists who are talking about what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "precepts of interbeing." They seem to, within a Buddhist tradition, say, "Yes, I see what you're trying to do here. There is no break; there is no dualism that humans are indebted in nature." And it works. And similarly when Native American people say, "All of our relatives." Now I understand what you are talking about because we use the prayer in our religious rites of "all of our relatives," which means the bears and other kinds of beings help there. We can do that with Christianity if we have religious leaders in the Christian tradition who work their way to a deep ecology type of position.

*You wrote that Bahuguna, a leader in the Chipko movement, said that the ecology movement needs three kinds of people: humanitarian scientists, social*



*activists, and compassionate literate people. Since this is a literary journal, what are the characteristics of a compassionate literate person, and what is their role in this movement?*

That's a good question. They can help articulate our feelings. They can help bring out through poetry and drama the stories that victims tell. They can bring out the stories which inspire us. And they have roles as champions, lyricists, slogan-makers, all kinds of creative expressions. We have some of those—a lot of those in the Earth First movement, in fact. Probably one of the most frequent type of activists is the folk singer who creates songs. Dana Lyons is one of them. Lyons wrote a song that is in the state songbook for the centennial of the state of Washington, called "My State is a Dumpsite," that he teaches to high school students. The Hanford nuclear reactor dumpsite is in Washington and they want to bring nuclear reactor wastes for all the United States into Washington. Creative lyrics are a very valuable aspect of the ecology movement.

*What is the biocentric vision of an ecotopian ideal?*

I think there are many ecotopian, many biocentric visions, and I have yet to sit down and write my own. Maybe that's what I'll do next year, write my own vision of ecotopia. I think what we need are more biocentric visions. There is no one path; there are many possibilities here that would be compatible. I'm attracted to the decentralized, small scale places such as Aldous Huxley describes in his novel *Island*. And we see another place for creative artists, for English majors: to write more ecotopian visions as well, rather than these visions which explore the neurotic nature of relationships in contemporary cities, or the urban nihilism, or angst, or pessimism. Ecotopia is what might come out if we change this or that in society and how it might come out. So, maybe we can get a whole writing program going, or a course in the University of Iowa writing program here where students would be writing ecotopian novels. I think that would be quite exciting. Take a specific place such as this part of Iowa, and with the contemporary consciousness and deep ecology visionaries, how would it be transformed into an ecotopia? What would you say? What would you discard in the technology? How would farming be done? How would people relate to each other? Where would be the sacred sites? Or would there be sacred sites?

